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BOYCOTTING A SEGREGATED PLAYHOUSE

ANNCR: IN SOUTH AFRICA, A PERSONAL DECISION BY ISRAEL'S AMBASSADOR NOT TO ATTEND THE PRETORIA PREMIERE OF A PLAY IN A SEGREGATED THEATER HAS STIRRED A BROADER BOYCOTT. VOA CORRESPONDENT BOB CHANCELLOR HAS DETAILS IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE: THE PLAY IS "GOLDA" -- THE STORY OF ISRAEL'S FORMER PRIME MINISTER GOLDA MEIR -- WHICH OPENS IN PRETORIA'S BREYTENBACH THEATER ON JULY SIXTH. ISRAELI AMBASSADOR ITZHAK UNNA WAS INVITED AS A GUEST OF HONOR. BUT HE DECLINED THE INVITATION BECAUSE THE BREYTENBACH THEATER IS N O T ONE OF THE TWENTY-SIX PLAYHOUSES IN SOUTH AFRICA RECENTLY OPENED TO ALL RACES. A NEWSPAPER, HE SAYS, ASKED HIM WHY HE DECLINED THE INVITATION, AND HE RESPONDED THAT "AS AN ISRAELI, I FELT I HAVE NOT ONLY A RESPONSIBILITY TO MY COUNTRY, BUT ALSO TO OUR OWN LEGACY OF ETHICS AND MORALITY. I COULD NOT COMBINE THAT WITH THE OFFENSIVE ABSURDITY OF A THEATER THAT KEEPS PEOPLE OUT BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN, PARTICULARLY WHEN THE SUBJECT OF THE PLAY -- GOLDA MEIR -- ALWAYS FOUGHT FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY."

THE ISRAELI AMBASSADOR SAYS HE WAS NOT, AND IS NOT, CONDUCTING A CAMPAIGN BUT SIMPLY FOLLOWING HIS OWN RIGHT TO ATTEND OR NOT ATTEND A THEATER. HE INTENDS INSTEAD TO SEE THE PLAY TWO WEEKS LATER AT AN INTEGRATED THEATER IN JOHANNESBURG. BUT CAMPAIGN OR NOT, HIS STAND STRUCK A RESPONSIVE CHORD. SEVERAL OTHER AMBASSADORS AS WELL AS LOWER-LEVEL DIPLOMATS IN PRETORIA IMMEDIATELY ANNOUNCED THAT THEY, TOO, WILL NOT GO TO THE SEGREGATED PLAY.

AMBASSADOR UNNA SAYS HE WAS IMMENSELY SURPRISED BY THE REACTION, AND, IN ONE WAY, PLEASED. HE NOTES THAT IN CAPETOWN,

COLORED, OR MIXED-RACE, PEOPLE APPROACHED HIM ON THE STREET AND SHYLY THANKED HIM FOR HIS STAND FOR HUMAN RIGHTS. "IT'S NOT MY FUNCTION TO TRY TO AFFECT CHANGES IN SOUTH AFRICA", HE SAYS, "BUT THAT IN ITSELF HAS BEEN WORTH TAKING THE STEP, AND IF IN A MARGINAL CONTEXT I HAVE MADE A CONTRIBUTION, I SHALL BE VERY HAPPY."

NOT ONLY DIPLOMATS JOINED AMBASSADOR UNNA. THE PRETORIA WOMEN'S ZIONIST LEAGUE ALSO WITHDREW ITS SPONSORSHIP OF THE PLAY. AND THE AMBASSADOR SAYS COMMENTS HE HAS RECEIVED FROM SOME PEOPLE IN POSITIONS OF POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA INDICATE THAT THEY ARE RATHER PLEASED WITH HIS ACTION.